

Focus Committee Meeting, November 17, 2005

Present: Bob Fichtel, Chris Gagnon, Pat Frederick, Christina Sargent, Sallie Thoma, and Town Planner Eric Smith. Members of other Town boards, Dave Perry, John MacMillan, Joe Kalagher and Richie Wright, also attended the meeting.

The meeting was called to order by Chairman Bob Fichtel at 7:00 PM.

The meeting began with a discussion of zoning for the Murray Road area. The Committee is aware that any change in zoning must be approved at a Town Meeting.

Chris Gagnon told the Committee that a representative of Gardner's adjoining Summit Industrial Park, approached about possibly expanding development across the town line, had said Ashburnham would need to supply a natural gas line before they would be interested. Stan Herriott of the Light Plant has told Chris that AMLP can offer a special industrial electrical rate, also available to business owners. Stan would like to see a test wind tower installed in the Murray Road area. Richie Wright said someone had come before the Planning Board with a proposal for building a wind tower, but nothing had come of it.

Rick Sisson wants to change 60 acres on the west side of Murray Road to Residential zoning, retaining Light Industrial zoning for the 20 acres accessible from Rte. 101.

Dave Perry is opposed to giving up Industrial zoning for such a large piece of property. The Focus Committee has been especially concerned by the proposed Forest Legacy designation for the Beals property on Route 12, also zoned Light Industrial, which would restrict its development in perpetuity. The consensus is that while Ashburnham is not a prime industrial location today, we do not know what Industry's needs will be in the future; it seems prudent to set aside land now, rather than let all property be developed as residential.

Committee members discussed the feasibility of building on the Murray Road property, much of which is wetland. Gary Howland of the Conservation Commission has said that wetland *can* be crossed as long as it is replicated. It was pointed out that Gardner's Summit Industrial Park development, just west of the Murray Road parcel, had crossed wetland, which had then been replicated elsewhere on the property.

Richie reported that former Town Manager Katie Nunez and Select Board members, after walking the Murray Road property, had decided against trying to acquire it for the Town.

Tim Driskell of the Conservation Commission will be invited to the next Focus Committee meeting, for further discussion of wetland use.

Consideration of the Murray Road area ended at 7:42 PM, when RCAP Solutions representative Paul Teixeira arrived to consult with the Committee about Senior/Affordable Housing. He had met with the Committee on January 13, 2005, to introduce and explain services provided by RCAP.

Mr. Teixeira told the Committee that the housing units already constructed in Townsend, Groton, Hubbardston and Bolton, all have waiting lists. Senior citizens clearly prefer to "age in place", rather than move from their own homes to assisted living or nursing facilities. Elder housing can provide people with more manageable living space than their longtime residences, while seeming more homelike than institutional. Many residents are

still active in community affairs, go shopping, golfing, etc. So many still drive their own cars that parking around these housing facilities is an issue.

Hubbardston has just received a \$3 million HUD grant to provide elder care for persons in the senior housing there. Such grants are increasingly difficult to obtain; HUD funds are being leveled or cut due to Federal spending for the war in Iraq, and for hurricane relief.

While Bolton's housing has a 14,000 square foot footprint, plus 9,000 square feet of parking area, Ashburnham might need less, because of proposed sites' being served by Town water and sewer lines.

MA 40R is a "Smart Growth Initiative" consisting of ten initiatives designed by the State for development planning. Towns might have to meet five of the ten initiatives, which seem more appropriate to cities than to rural areas.

Christina was relieved to learn that RCAP-supervised construction would be designed by an architect to fit in with prevailing building styles in the neighborhood.

Some of the information shared by Mr. Teixeira:

HUD's 202 program serves very low income individuals and couples.

25% of HUD 202 units are handicapped accessible.

Funds, directly from HUD's Boston office, subject to Smart Growth Initiatives.

Whatever we do will not be easy; much depends on population to be served.

HUD would give the Town 100% credit toward 40B goal for affordable housing.

So far, only cities in MA are meeting their 40B goals.

A Comprehensive Housing Plan can help Town meet Initiative requirements.

Density requirements can be waived for towns under 10,000 population.

"40S", before the state legislature, would reimburse towns for educating children brought in by low income housing requirement.

The process of obtaining a grant can take more than two years.

Many projects go through more than one funding round before acceptance.

Last year, HUD funded 123 units statewide – maybe five projects in all.

We need support, from townspeople and state legislators for our district.

There are friendly and unfriendly 40Bs.

RCAP works in partnership with towns.

Discussion:

Planning Board members questioned downtown zoning for elderly/affordable housing. Christina pointed to page 13 of Zoning regulations: Supportive housing for persons 55 years and older, with non-medical needs, can be approved by Special Permit. Joe thinks "Special Permit" approval is too vague; there should be rules and regulations for what can be approved.

Bob mentioned that the Caouette Property in South Ashburnham may be more immediately accessible than the Highway Department land for elderly/affordable housing. Mr. Teixeira wants to walk the proposed properties "before the snow flies".

Chris recommended a nonbinding referendum on next spring's Town Meeting warrant, asking public support for housing for persons age 55 and older.

Further Information an RCAP Solutions:

RCAP Solutions acts as project developer. A nonprofit entity is created in the town, with trustees to oversee the project. RCAP provides staff and management for the property, paying employees from rental proceeds. There would be a 40-year deed restriction, that the property must be used as originally intended. The Town can lease the land to the 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that owns the building.

Thus far, all RCAP developments have been on town-owned land.

The Board of Directors can be appointed by, and remain answerable to, the Town. Some boards, such as Groton's, remain very actively involved, while others may only meet annually.

A Request for Proposals (RFP) must be prepared so other developers can apply.

Dick Heaton, from Bolton, is a hired consultant who makes sure contractors stay within estimates for the project.

Further Discussion:

Town Planner Eric Smith would like to see affordable housing come to Ashburnham.

The Caouette property is no more remote from town center than the existing Ashley Court senior housing. The MART bus could provide adequate shuttle service.

A walk-through of possible sites was proposed for Nov. 30th at 9:00 AM; rain date, Dec. 7th at 9:00 AM.

Paul Teixeira and Planning Board members left the meeting at 8:35 PM.

The Focus Committee will attend the Selectmen's meeting at 8:30 PM, Nov. 21st.

Next meeting of the Focus Committee will be Dec. 1st at 7:00 PM.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:45 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Patricia H. Frederick